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THE LEAST OF THESE

BY

LINCOLN STEFFENS

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THE LEAST OF THESE

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A FACT STORY

BY
LINCOLN STEFFENS
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HILLACRE BOOKHOUSE
RIVERSIDE, CONN.

1910

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DEDICATION.

 HIS little book is made for bad people: sinners who know that they sin. And it is meant, not to correct but to comfort them; as they understood from the start, they and their friends; and no one else apparently. Everybody's Magazine published the story originally, in the January number, 1909, and you can see, from the first line to the last, that I thought everybody would rejoice with me over

the very personal good news I was reporting. And many letters came, and some of them showed an understanding that was profound. But others asked to know more.

Most of these were from good men and women who said that they couldn't see the good in my good news. Had they failed to find the news in it, I should not have been so instructed, since the gospel of "the least of these" was just about 1909 years old when I reported this example of it.

I cannot help these people. They need help. I feel sincerely that good people need more

DEDICATION

help than any other kind of people; they are sinners who do not know that they sin. But—for that reason, perhaps—they don't know enough of the evil in the world to know so much of the good as there is in Bailey's story.

I can satisfy them upon one point, however. All the readers who missed my "moral" (so to speak) were interested in my hero, and they all asked the question the children always ask:

"And what became of Bailey?"

The story found Bailey. He had disappeared, leaving no trace behind. (He had "corresponded" with others; there was no

one to “correspond” with him.) But I hoped—and feared—that he might see his story in the magazine; and he did. Along in August—seven months later—he wrote me from the sunny Southwest.

“Dear Friend,” he began and, I imagine, he hesitated. But he decided for me. “I think I may [call you that],” he said.

“Your article has just come to my attention by chance. I could not help but recognize Bailey and the Director. Let me thank you for it, for the ‘heart’ in the story, the help and the courage it will give to many, and for understanding Bailey—a little.”

DEDICATION

That was all. Nothing about himself, but he signed his right name and he gave his address, so I asked the children's question. He answered, and this second letter, like the first, is reproduced in facsimile on another page.

If this were a fiction story and I had invented it, these sunny letters might be polished into a happy ending. But a fact-story never ends; never; nor the battles of life. Bailey's final battle isn't fought and won. No man knows that better than Bailey. He will have other battles to fight and, even if he wins them all, there will be other fellows with battles to win,

and lose. And some of these losers wrote to me, and I noticed that not one of them asked me what had become of Bailey. They didn't dare, I guess; they assumed that Bailey, like them, had fought and lost. And they didn't mind, evidently. The story ended well enough for them. It comforted them, and—since God is the author of it, I may say—they “love it,” as they wrote; and had “cut it out to keep.”

And these are the people for whom this book is cut out and put in shape to carry in a hip pocket or under a shirt. It will lie well between a bare breast

DEDICATION

and a "jimmy," for example; and I would not have any son of man leave the book behind just because he was going to break into a house at night, or get drunk, or preach half the truth, or write a lie, or employ little children, or sell bad goods, or accept, or even offer, a bribe. That's the very time to have it by. For the comforting truth Bailey has brought to book here is that there will be hope for us, even after we shall have done the wrong we are planning presently to do; any wrong by anybody: you, I, even Bailey; and that even after he or I or you shall have fought our last fight,

DEDICATION

even though we lose it, even then
there still will be hope, and faith,
and love to give.

L. S.

Little Point, Riverside, Conn.

May 1st, 1910.

THE LEAST OF THESE

LET me present to you, as a Christmas gift, a jewel I picked up once when I was wading around on the bottom of a city. If you accept it in the spirit in which it is offered, you shall see that beautiful things lie buried in the muck of life. Not truth alone, and misery; faith is to be found there, and service, hope, and charity. They look dirty and they often are polluted, but so is the pearl unclean when

the diver brings it up, and diamonds in the mine are rough.

The city I refer to seemed to be well governed, and I was troubled. Good is hard to believe; to prove it is harder still. I was working anxiously to be sure, therefore; searching deep for my evidence, when I came upon the jail. That stood wide open, both the cell doors within and the gate to the world outside; and no prisoner escaped. None had ever tried to since the day a fellow who declared he was going was caught, as he started, by the other prisoners and quietly thrashed. On the other hand, I heard that prisoners had been known to weep

when, having done their time, they were sent away.

Now, the jail of a city is not ordinarily the place where convicts are kept. "Bad men" are committed there, but not for long. The jail is for the weak: men and women and children, "drunks and disorderlies," loafers, bums, vagrants, sneak thieves and petty criminals generally. They are despised by the police; they will obey the whistle like dogs. They are shunned by professional criminals; they don't dare help on a "good job," and, if compelled to, will "peach on a pal." And, indeed, they are beneath contempt. They do weak things weakly,

and are without respect either for themselves or for one another. They are lost souls. They have surrendered. They breathe, but they are dead. The jail is the tomb where we bury out of sight of the living world these ends of men and women, them and their shuffling, slinking, harmless, all-enveloping despair — ordinarily.

The moment you entered, unnoticed, its open doors, you felt that there was something out of the ordinary about this particular jail. The prisoners were the same, but there was a smile on their vice-formed faces, a wan but natural smile. It vanished at sight of a natural human being; the

cowardly eyes shifted, the mean, soft feet shuffled, the useless hands—the whole thing got away somehow. And so does the healthy visitor. I never really saw that jail; I couldn't "look into" it. But that smile on those faces—having seen, I had to account for that. It was proof positive of the presence there of somebody out of the ordinary, so I searched for "the man." I asked questions of the officials that had to visit and know about the jail.

These were not many, and the few didn't know very much. The Mayor, whose personality and administration made possible this wide-open jail, didn't know it was

open, and he didn't seem to care.

“What of it?” he said. “It’s pretty, and I guess it’s good, but it doesn’t prove good government and it doesn’t prevent bad government.”

He referred me to the Director of the Department of Charities and Correction, which had jurisdiction. That gentleman was out; he hardly ever was in, and his staff “understood, in a way,” that there were “queer doings” in the jail; they “really couldn’t say” what they were, nor who did them. The Director knew that much. He said, when I found him, that the jail was left open as a part of the policy of an

under-jailor, one Bailey, but that the department didn't discover the practice till experience had proved it safe.

"Something keeps the prisoners there," he said.

"Something" is the word he used, and yet he knew, he must have known, I thought, that it was "somebody." I asked him what the "thing" might be that chained those prisoners there.

"Honor?" I suggested, with some sarcasm. And why not? Honor may be a slight virtue, and primitive, but, as I urged upon the Director, "it is vigorous, and jail-birds are not vigorous."

“True,” he answered me very quietly, “you are altogether right; jail-birds are not vigorous, but — as you also say — honor is. Honor lives even through dishonor.”

Intent upon my search for one Bailey, “the” man I was after, it was annoying to be stopped thus by another man. But men, real men, who see things from their own angle and play off their own bat, are too rare to overlook one, so when it appeared that the Director also was “somebody,” I let the interview wander far enough to discover that Bailey’s superior was wise and very gentle. He had been a clergyman, but his wisdom was of his

religion, not of his church. He knew this world. He knew it well. He knew so much of it that he was sure he didn't know much. He never was sarcastic, for example; nor enthusiastic. He had faith; he believed in God.

“Things grow,” he said.

We all believe that, or say it; but when a man knows it, when the sense of gradual growth and natural change is an inherent part of every thought and feeling of his conscious life, why, then that man becomes patient. And the Director was as patient for good as he was with evil. He was patient even with my impatience.

“ Good isn’t created,” he said, “ not even by God, and, as for us humans, all we can do is to find it growing and, by protecting and cultivating the sprouts and pulling up the weeds, give the good a better chance.”

And he was satisfied that this should be so. He went on to say contentedly that he wasn’t of any importance, and that Bailey wasn’t.

“ Bailey and this department,” he said, “ are only relieving pain. We are weeds ourselves. The Mayor is tending the good seeds; he is cultivating conditions that will prevent pain. He is laboring to make jails and Departments

of Charities and Correction unnecessary. That's what he meant by his remark to you about Bailey. We all want to abolish Bailey and me or put ourselves at real work."

"And Bailey?" I asked.

"I don't know, yet," he said. "Sometimes I fear Bailey is making himself necessary; that he is building something upon his own personality; and anything a man roots solely in his own personality dies when he dies. But, as I say, I don't know, yet. I don't need to know, yet. I'm looking into the jail now and then and letting the thing grow. It seems to have some roots in ——"

“Things?” I suggested, and I could not help being bitter. “Things like honor?”

“Yes,” he said sweetly, “There’s something of that in it. But honor isn’t all.”

There were schools in the jail, he said; not one, but several schools or classes. It was the policy of the under-jailor to have a carpenter come in at night and teach carpentry; an electrician to teach electricity. A bum who had gone through college taught another bum geography, while he, the college graduate, belonged to a class of two that studied plumbing. It was a curious curriculum. There was a Bible class,

Aug 6-'09

Mr Lincoln Steffens
N Y City.

Dear Friend -

I think I
may for you have
been my friend on
occasion -

Your article -
Ever truly yours

...at year, ...
come to my attention -
by chance.

Could not help but
recognize Bailey and the
Director.

Let me thank you for
the article, the "heart in
the ..."

encourage it more than a
many & for understand-

ing Bailey - a little.

Yours Sincerely,

but that likewise was small. The only course they all took together, apparently, was literature; the under-jailor read aloud to them any clear English that carried thought he could understand. The list of his selections was odd, modern, but, on the whole, noble.

“But what about this under-jailor?” I asked impatiently. “And what is his policy?”

The Director answered patiently. “Bailey?” he said. “Bailey was a mission worker. I had a mission church once. Mission workers are queer people; there’s usually something wrong with them. But Bailey—I saw much

of him; he seemed to be all right. When the Mayor made me head of this department, Bailey asked for a place in the jail; any place. He didn't say what he wanted it for; I didn't ask him. I thought it over and I decided to — see. I suppose that was the way the Mayor felt about me. I had Bailey appointed a night guard. He did very well. He came to have an influence over the prisoners. They obey his slightest word; and when they go away they correspond with him. He teaches them to help one another. It's very good. Bailey was promoted to be under-jailor."

“But what’s the man’s idea?” I asked. “What’s his theory?”

The former clergyman didn’t know, exactly. “It isn’t my idea, you see,” he said quietly. “It’s Bailey’s. So I probably couldn’t understand it perfectly. You would better see Bailey.”

Of course I had to see Bailey, but I explained that I needed first the key; some clue to the man; some notion of that about him of which he himself might not be conscious.

“What’s his hold on the prisoners?” I asked.

“I don’t know, exactly,” the Director said, incuriously. He went on to suggest, however,

that, for one thing, Bailey “seemed never to give a man up for lost; never.” Persuading a drunkard not to drink, a thief to stop stealing, a loafer to work, he forgave backsliding not only “until seven times” but “until seventy times seven.” No matter how often, no matter how low a fellow might fall, Bailey told him there still was hope.

Hope for the hopeless! That was a clue. But the desire—how did Bailey awaken the thought, the wish to—hope?

“N-n-o,” the Director said, “it isn’t exactly religion.” The fact was, he couldn’t say just

what it was, unless it was that Bailey had hope to give, and faith. And, as if it were related, he added: "He does give service, you know. Bailey performs the most menial offices for these people; tasks they won't do for one another."

The Director told me what some of these services were, and they were, indeed, menial. They were horrid; necessary, but impossible.

My perplexity made the Director smile, but he couldn't or wouldn't—at any rate he didn't help me to understand. And the insight I got from him was profound as compared with that fur-

nished by all others. I had to see Bailey.

Bailey did not shake hands when we met. I offered to, but he looked away and led me to the desk where he kept his correspondence with his discharged prisoners. He was a small man, young, not well, evidently, and very serious. Bailey never smiled. Having been directed to show me some sample letters, he did so. They were rude, penciled, often incoherent writings from many, many places; for, of course, the writers were tramps and petty thieves. One note ran through them all, however—endeavor, dull hope and an affectionate re-

spect for Bailey.

“I fell in Pittsburg, but got out and moved on. Was pulled in Scranton on suspicion. When I got out, I got that way again. I ain’t no good, Mr. Bailey, but I remember what you says to me that time. I’ll never quit trying.”

Bailey remarked uneasily, by way of explanation, that these men were “tired.” They had no strength, and it was a “rest for them to give up; to quit trying.”

“What’s the use of tiring them?” I asked.

Bailey fussed with the papers, put some letters carefully away, got out others before he replied.

“It seems like suicide when they give up the last hope,” he said. “It’s like dying. And anybody will try to save anybody that is dying, I think.”

There was no rebuke in the tone of the reply, as there was in the substance. Bailey evidently did not expect either sympathy or understanding. I guess he was used to my attitude. I did not alter it, however; not then.

“But what makes them tired?” I asked, and I suppose I sneered when I suggested “Work?”

“Yes,” he answered directly, “work and vice. Vice weakens them. Work tires them very

much."

"How do they know that?" I asked. "Did they ever try it?"

Bailey fussed with those letters, keeping his eyes fixed upon them, but he answered:

"Yes; most of them did, as children."

As children! Were bums the products of child labor? Was that the genesis of the good-for-nothing?

"Yes," said Bailey, simply. "A large percentage of our prisoners are exhausted human beings, devitalized by early work. They have no energy left, no spirit, no strength. Early vice explains others. The rest are

born so."

"Born tired!" I almost laughed forth the well-worn phrase, but Bailey did not notice.

"Yes," he said, "born of tired or vicious parents."

He spoke like Fate, without resentment, without sorrow, without purpose. He wasn't trying, he evidently did not expect to convince me. He saw that I was an educated ignoramus and he simply handed out to me, as a weary salesman will, whatever I called for. And this fact crushed me. Reading such things in books is one thing; taking them direct from a man that knows is another. Hearsay some-

how convinces one. I changed my tone.

“What can you hope to do for them, Bailey?” I asked gently.

He noticed the change. He glanced up at me, but his eyes couldn't stand my gaze. They dropped.

“I kind o' hope,” he said softly, “to make them hope. Men smile when they hope, and there's strength in a smile.”

Stabbing at his vitals, as a reporter must, to get the news, I said :

“But you, Bailey, you don't smile?”

He ceased fussing with the

papers; he was still a moment. Then he seemed to speak the truth.

“There is no hope for me,” he said.

I made him go on by keeping silent myself, silent and expectant.

“There isn’t much hope for them either, really, but I can do something for some of them,” he said. “But,” he concluded after an interval, “nobody can do anything for me.”

It would be hard to say what it was that was so convincing in this statement by this man. His humility was obvious; it shrouded his whole attitude, physical

and mental. As a matter of fact, it was more like shame than resignation. I felt that I was near a knowledge and a philosophy which I never could fathom, and I did not wonder any more that the Director "didn't know." To gain time and the man's confidence, and so get his story, which the Director said Bailey never had told and never would tell, I drew him out about his work.

His "method" was to meet the new prisoners as a friend; not as a jailor, and yet "not exactly" with kindness; but "more on a level, man to man." Taking them in, he made them com-

fortable. He cleaned them, as a nurse would clean them; washed them; treated their bruises; bathed their sores; clothed them warmly; put them to bed and to sleep.

“Sometimes they are brutal, yes,” he said. “And they have hurt me. But I never mind. I understand that they do not understand such treatment. But they remember. Most of them have had a mother or somebody who was that way with them, and by and by, when they are tired of resisting, they remember that way. I have seen the tears come then. I have seen them sob as little children do when they are tired—sob, and sigh, and so fall

asleep, smiling. That's always good; the first clean sleep like that is a great deal to them."

The odd curriculum of the school came about in this way, he said: He searched the new prisoners' minds as the police searched their pockets, and, though he found as little, there was always something: some interest, some poor, starved, dying interest. The only hold the man who studied electricity had left on all the interests of this world was a curiosity about the theory of that subject. He had had it as a boy, but never could satisfy it. Bailey was trying to satisfy it.

"Maybe he is a genius," I

said, "and will do something great after all."

Bailey shook his head. "No," he said, "he is no use any more. He was put to work at nine in a glass works; pushed a little car from the hot room into the cold room, and back, many times a day, for years. He is almost blind, bent, and — tired. No, he can't do anything in electricity. But I thought electricity might do something for him, give him an interest — hope — a false hope — good only for his —"

"Soul," I finished, to get over it. "Yes, I see. You think these funny little interests of theirs are the way to their minds

or souls, and so you teach them anything they want to learn—geography, plumbing, the Bible.”

“Yes,” said Bailey.

“And you don’t teach them anything they don’t want to learn?”

“No,” said Bailey. “That’s a mistake which is often made with such people.”

“You mean it’s wrong to try to teach them what *we* think they ought to know?”

“Yes,” said Bailey. “They are sick people, sick of soul, and very low, and sick souls must be fed like sick stomachs with anything they can take in and keep down.”

I shifted the subject to the “bad men,” the prisoners who were not vagrants, but petty criminals. Bailey’s face brightened.

“There’s hope for them,” he responded eagerly, almost cheerily. “Crime takes some strength, courage, enterprise—yes, even petty crime as compared with vagrancy.”

And Bailey told how he “let” them help one another and the vagrants. Finding that they formed little groups of two, three and more, he encouraged these “gangs” and, suggesting (without seeming to) that they hang together after they were

released, he developed a practise which has become an institution. The first gang that went forth consciously organized to look for honest work agreed among themselves that the first to find a job was to divide equally with the others. The second was to do the same, and the third, and so on till they all had "landed." None of them landed till Bailey had used secretly a political pull for one man. That man hired a room where they all slept. They hadn't food enough, but there was the jail, like a home, in the background, and though Bailey saw to it that the gang did not lose the fascinating sense

of independent self-help, he carried the scheme through. And then, when other prisoners and "gangs" came out, they were assisted by the first, and so merging, grew like a trust. Not rapidly, of course, for the members kept falling, old and new, again and again.

Nobody but Bailey, I guess, could have put up with the disappointments of that organization. The members themselves couldn't at first. The drunkards couldn't see why an habitual thief had to steal, and the thief lacked sympathy with the drunkard. Sometimes their disgust with one another was amusing.

One reformed "drunk and disorderly" used to curse, and urge the expulsion of every other reformed drunkard or thief that lost a job, though all the while he himself was backsliding periodically and costing more than he contributed. Bailey's patience shamed them gradually into a rough tolerance till they, too, learned "never to give a man up; never."

Well, as the gangs came out of the jail and joined the trust, more rooms were hired, and more, till finally the city took cognizance and rented a house; then the house next door; and the last time I was there it had

three houses strung together by doors cut in the walls.

“There had to be a place for them to fall back on as a home,” Bailey said, when he concluded his account. “And a house like that is better than a jail.”

“And there must be somebody,” I suggested, “some friend somewhere to visit and write to?”

“Yes,” said Bailey.

“Somebody that believes in them?” I pressed, prying.

“Yes,” said Bailey.

“Somebody that knows the worst in them and still believes.”

“Yes,” said Bailey.

“And what sort of a man is that, Bailey?”

He began fussing with his papers again, and that wouldn't do. I went at him direct.

"How do you do it, Bailey?"

He looked up for just a second, then down went his eyes. But he answered.

"Their friend cannot be a superior person," he said, squirming. "He cannot be better than they or he couldn't stand it, and they couldn't, either." He hesitated before he went on. "I tell them that I am as low as they are, and—and that's true."

He hurried on to tell me some of the awful things his prisoners had done, things I had never heard of. One should

know of them to understand fully the man and his work, but it is better not to understand fully. It's enough that after he had told enough he repeated his humiliation.

“I can talk to any of them, help them all, because I am as low as they are.”

It was time for his story, and I asked for it. He told it.

The first thing he remembers of his life is standing as a little boy on the bar of a dive, singing. He can see that scene vividly. He seems to have had a pretty child's voice; learned songs easily; and his father, a drunken bum, took him around, making him

Sept 15-1909

Mr Lincoln Steffens
Boston City Club
#9 Beacon St
Boston Mass —

My Dear Friend—

Your generous favor
7/3 at hand— I had not expected a
ply, hence it could not seem so

Let me thank you for your & your
interest in myself—

In reply to your questions I can
only say ^{that} when being obliged to get
up the work in

one wish seemed to be— just a
spot in the hills alone. I did not
want to see trouble or hear of
it— I did not want storm or
snow— I wanted flowers, the birds,

the open and time to think -

California seemed the place - I have purchased a little ten acre piece of land in the foothills of ... Co. Two years have have been spent in grubbing & clearing the land. It is now in producing crops.

The towering strength of the Sierras & the sunshine have been a tempermental tonic and done me a world of good. I believe the final battle fought & won

Four months ago I came to the city & am in touch with the throbbing world again -

The little ranch has a substantial house and farm buildings upon it and is rented to a happy little family -

Am with a good real-estate concern
and am doing well, but the
existence is so selfish that I am
not satisfied - am longing to be
of service & am hoping that
some day - in some way I may be
of use again.

Yours Very Sincerely

Wm. H. H. H.

1st Street -

perform for drinks. And the child sang till the man was drunk; then they both slept—in alleys, boxes, empty cars—where they fell. This went on for years. Often the child was drunken, too; whenever the barroom drunkards said, “Give the kid a drink,” he was made to drink. It was amusing to see the kid get drunk, sing wildly, reel and, finally, drop.

The father died. The boy woke up one morning to find him cold and, knowing nothing else to do, went on singing for pennies and food and the drinks, till his voice cracked. Then, his friends being tramps, the boy

took to the road. He did what tramps did: begged, stole, drank, rode on car trucks and in empty freights. He was debauched at four or five, degraded and diseased at twelve. And yet, as he told the story, I could see that a spirit that may have been his mother's (whom he never saw or heard of)—a soul that must have been fine and strong originally—had lived through it all. The mission caught it first. He reformed. He learned to read, and also somehow—this he never could explain—somehow Bailey rose above the emotion to an understanding of religion and of his world.

It is given to few really to understand Christianity; Bailey seemed to. His life—the worst of it, I mean—seems to have made possible such an utter comprehension as he had of the doctrine of humility, forgiveness, love and service. Indeed, he said as much indirectly.

“Christ must have been divine,” he reasoned once, “because, being pure, he understood my kind of people. The only others that do—are my kind of people. And,” looking up he added rather naïvely, “I think we understand Him. Why, He said that unless ye do it unto the least of these ye do it not

unto me."

Bailey's eyes widened as he spoke, as if to comprehend a justice as big as that.

"So you, Bailey, are doing it unto the least of these. Why aren't you happy?"

"Oh, you don't understand," he said, shocked at my interpretation. "I am the least of these. That's why I can help them as no other can; but, you see, there is nobody can help me."

Seeing in my face the doubt and annoyance I felt, he repeated the singular remark he made before. "That's true," he said.

Was it? I recalled his avoidance of my hand when we met;

his humility that was so much like shame; and, studying him there painfully before me, I was half convinced. I could not be wholly convinced because, you see, I realized that if a spirit that was as beautiful as his; that could do a service as loathsome, hopeless, loving and patient as that which he did there in that jail, day in and day out; if such a soul could live and work in a low body that was still low, why, then—then there was hope for all and forever.

And it was true. Year by year I looked in upon Bailey's city; always inquiring about Bailey's jail. His work was growing, expand-

ing, and the Director, wonderful man, was letting it grow. Till this year. When I called there in the spring and asked about the jail, the Director said that the jail and its organization were doing very well. He went into detail. He went with unwonted eagerness into great detail. The schools had developed; the instruction was better, and, yes, the curriculum was determined strictly by the wishes of the prisoners, each prisoner. And the houses had increased in number; that was the time I learned that there were three.

“Bailey built well,” the Director concluded. “It was something

that wanted to be done, a good that existed and he cultivated it so well that it could go on without him. Bailey made himself unnecessary."

"Bailey is gone, then," I inferred.

"Yes," the Director lied kindly, "he left us."

Bailey had been discharged. And for cause. I had to drag forth the good news. The Director didn't want to tell me the cause. He thought I had idealized Bailey, and he didn't care to destroy anybody's idols. Letting things grow, the Director was willing also to let them wither and die of themselves.

But my interest, as you know, was other than he thought; it was in the news, not the man, so I challenged the Director.

“I think,” I said, “that I would not have discharged that man for any cause.”

“You would if you knew what the cause was,” he answered.

And remembering that the Director, knowing more evil, was more merciful than I, and wiser and more patient, I was convinced. It was true.

It is true. It is true that there is hope for all and forever; it is true that the spirit of an angel can live in a body that is low; it is true that beautiful things,

polluted but precious, lie buried
in the muck at the bottom of
the cities.





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